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# Artful Wood

December 1999 through  
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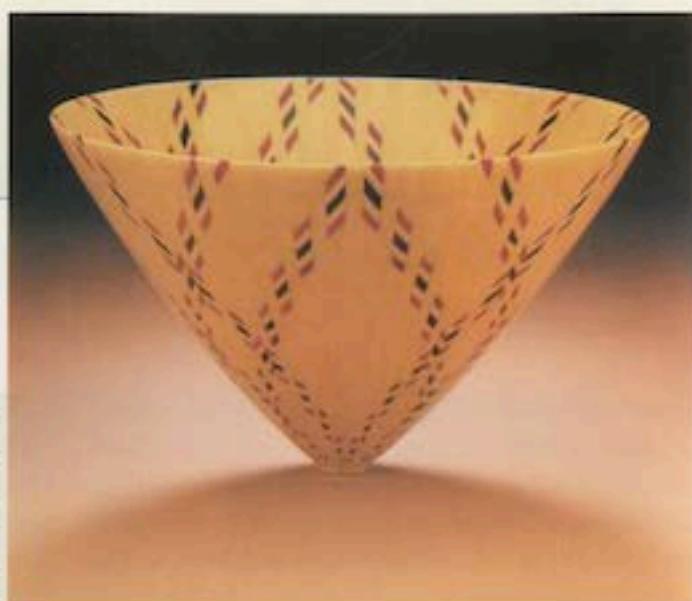
Michael Schuler (United States, b. 1950),  
*Segmented Bowl*, c. 1994, maple, ebony,  
purnan buco, 2 1/4 x 4 1/2 in., Los Angeles  
County Museum of Art, gift of Dr. Irving  
and Mari Lipton

*Artful Wood*, an installation of works from LACMA's permanent collection, celebrates the new art form of turned and carved wood. This medium—with ceramics, studio glass, metalworking, fiber art, and art furniture—has its roots in the post-World War II craft revival movement and has recently received recognition as a separate discipline of decorative arts.

Wood-turning (or lathe-turning) remains one of the oldest craft forms, boasting a rich history that stretches back to the ancient Egyptians, who are credited with inventing the hand-powered lathe, a device capable of hollowing out logs. These hollowed forms were then fashioned into vessels for domestic and ritual use. In the 20th century, the work of acclaimed British artist and designer David Pye and American master-turner James Prestini validated lathe-turning as a legitimate artistic technique, and Prestini was featured in a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1949. The finely designed and executed vessels of Pye and Prestini transcend function, engaging the viewer in a dialogue about the aesthetic properties of balance, symmetry, profile, and continuous line.

Since the beginning of the studio wood movement 50 years ago, some artists have extended the functional tradition of the classically turned and precisely engineered bowl, exploiting the organic qualities of the wood (grain and growth patterns). Others expanded upon and enhanced conventional forms through carving, surface texturing, and complex construction techniques such as lamination and segmentation. Still others have used the lathe only as a means of achieving a circular form or abandoned the lathe entirely in favor of freely sculpted, nonutilitarian objects.

In *Artful Wood*, the vessels of virtuoso turners Robert Stockdale and Philip Moulthrop—in which the graceful lines of the undulating shapes play against the inherently irregular graining pattern of the wood—can be appreciated for their refinement of form and material. The intricately designed bowls and vase forms of William Hunter and Virginia Dotson show the artists' fascination with the interplay of opposing qualities such as mass and absence, light and darkness, and surface and depth. The whimsical, trompe l'œil sculptural objects of Merryll Saylan delight the eye and imagination.



In recent decades, the field of wood-turning and sculpting has expanded rapidly. Many more artists are becoming interested in the discipline, and they are given the opportunity to master the technical skills and understand aesthetic issues through university art programs and apprenticeships. This influx of talent has brought considerable attention to the nascent wood-art movement and has been a catalyst for innovation and experimentation. Artists have brought new tools to the lathe, enabling them to produce fantastic forms that were never before technically possible. Exploring the expressive potential of the wood, many artists have brought a new emotionalism to their work, transforming utilitarian vessels into containers of content and meaning. Contemporary wood artists have been inspired to incorporate a variety of materials such as silver, beading, precious gems, and ivory. They have also experimented with turning other organic matter, as can be seen in the vases formed of pinecones, and the multilayered platters made from vegetal stalks and roots by Italian turner Gianfranco Angelino.

The superlative objects in *Artful Wood* were drawn from the museum's permanent holdings of the Irving and Mari Lipton Collection of studio wood art. Over the past three years, the Liptons have made major gifts of wood art to the museum, and LACMA now has an important specialist collection that includes works by leading artists from North America, Australia, Europe, and Japan.

This installation was curated by Jo Lauria, assistant curator of the Department of Decorative Arts. It is on the second level of the Anderson Building.